

# ***Epistemological Holism and Underdetermined Truth: Towards a Quinean Relativism***

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**Abstract:** The challenge towards the analytic-synthetic distinction is a frequently discussed topic in Quine's works and literature surrounding Quine. The paper utilizes this challenge as a starting point to examine the broader consequences of Quine's epistemological holism and its impact on the Quinean understanding of truth. By introducing the arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction from the *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, the paper suggests that these arguments rest on salient foundations, yet the underestimation of conceptual schemes and the theory-relative qualities ascribed to truth by these arguments could compel a Quinean into accepting a relativistic position towards truth and its own ontology. This move could lead to criticisms and, more importantly, a slip into an overly skeptical account of relativism that Quine does not desire. The paper ends by arguing how Quine's position in the *Two Dogmas* could be clarified to strengthen his epistemological holism against objections on these grounds.

**Keywords:** epistemological holism, relativism, Quine, analytic-synthetic distinction

## **1. Introduction**

The early account of the analytic-synthetic distinction was included in one of Hume's theses. Known as "Hume's Fork," he divided the meaning of statements to be either analytic or synthetic, their truth to be either necessary or contingent, and their purported knowledge to be either a priori or a posteriori. For instance, a statement such as "all bachelors are unmarried males" would be necessarily true in any circumstance. Equally, granted one has adequate understanding of what "bachelor" and "unmarried male" mean, they would not need to seek beyond the words in the statement to know that it is true, thus a priori. This thesis was later developed by Kant, who defined an analytic proposition to be one that is "true in virtue of its meaning."

This distinction comes to a halt with Quine's epistemological holism, which instead proposes an empiricism without such distinctions, by holding the concept of analyticity to be the product of underestimating the role that practical choice plays in epistemic networks. The paper revisits the *Two Dogmas* and Quine's argument against analyticity by arguing that the epistemological holism advanced here implies a strong relativistic approach to truth and meaning. Quinean relativism, as this paper terms it, is an approach to truth and meaning that meets certain difficulties. Most of these points of contention have to do with the basic intuition about absolute truths and fears of devolving into empty skepticism. To amend these shortcomings, the paper looks at a possible defense from the

indeterminacy of translation that would hopefully contain truth within conceptual schemes and avoid an overly skeptical account of ontology.

The paper is formatted as follows. Section 1 deals with an introduction to Quine's epistemological holism by exploring key arguments in the *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* and discussing them in depth with respect to their relativistic colors. Section 2 discusses how Quinean relativism could be perceived as a product of its truth as contained within epistemic networks and the underdetermined theory of systems of beliefs. Furthermore, section 3 identifies and offers some potential responses to points of contention that this relativism creates. The last section will discuss these issues and seek to raise the skeptical account as something that Quineans would like to avoid. To mitigate this, the paper proposes a clarification of Quine's position to advance a more neatly defined version of his relativism.

## 2. Dogma-less Empiricism

Beginning with the *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, the work of Quine [1] consisted of a set of well-known criticisms against the concept of analyticity held by logical positivists like Carnap. Briefly reviewing Quine's argument, he interpreted analytic statements as hinging on a cognitive synonymy between different linguistic forms, e.g., bachelor and unmarried man. This cognitive synonymy, upon closer examination, contains the quality of an interchangeability without losing truth value. In other words, in any situation (excepting a few exceptional cases that Quine described, such as meaning bachelor as the holder of an undergraduate degree), a true statement containing the word "bachelor" can have the word replaced with the phrase "unmarried man" without making the statement false.

This interchangeability *salva veritate*, as Quine [1] termed it, cannot be understood extensionally since extensional equivalence could be accidental. It could just so happen that in this world, all bachelors are unmarried. After all, suppose an alternate world without any birth defects; then the word "human" in that world could perhaps enjoy interchangeability *salva veritate* with a phrase like "primate with four limbs and a brain size of XXX." The statement "all humans are primates with four limbs and a brain size of XXX" would seem synthetic rather than analytic, as it is entirely conceivable of a human being born with less than four limbs or a different brain size. On the other hand, an intensional (meaning-based) explanation of cognitive synonymy would be question-begging. Quine [1] correctly saw the impossibility of deriving analyticity from cognitive synonymy and opted for explaining analyticity without recourse to this concept, though this overview provides a sound introduction to how Quine will go on to reject the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic.

Quine's challenge towards analyticity can be summed up as follows: one cannot plausibly grasp analyticity without presupposing an understanding of analyticity in the language. An extensional understanding of analyticity via semantic rules that outline which statements are analytic, such as the example of L0 that Quine [1] gave, does not suffice as an explanation of analyticity if one recalls the aforementioned insufficiency of explaining interchangeability *salva veritate* through extensional agreements. After all, it is not at all clear how the analytic equivalence of "bachelor" and "unmarried man" is rooted in a semantic foundation any more stable than the synthetic statement that "the human population is 8 billion people.

Consider the growing role of academia and changes to the English language; the word "bachelor" today has become increasingly associated with a "bachelor of arts" as opposed to "unmarried man." For the sake of the argument (although the converse is quite easily demonstrable), let one suppose that these different definitions are not further divided into indivisible words. It is conceivable that the word "bachelor" will come to mean "people with an undergraduate degree." Moreover, suppose a future law to increase birth rates were to require that all college graduates be married before they receive their degree; then it follows that the word "bachelor" can mean something entirely opposite to its analytic counterpart. Certainly, these are hypothetical scenarios, but they suffice to show that

“bachelors are unmarried men” is not qualitatively different from synthetic statements about the world when taking into consideration the influences of extra-linguistic facts.

For Quine, defeating the dogma of analyticity and its corollary distinction from synthetic statements is key to criticizing the dogma of reductionism that supports it. Radical reductionism, in Quinean thought, relates to the translatability of meaningful statements into confirmable statements about experience. In other words, statements can be confirmed or disconfirmed based on experience with the outstanding case of analytic statements being vacuously confirmed no matter what. It is also here that Quine asserts his epistemological holism by arguing that empirical statements should be confirmed against the corporate body of knowledge, rather than individual experiences that radical reductionism suggests.

This is the point at which Quine began introducing a theory of meaning with relativistic colors. Statements, especially those that do not pertain directly to the immediate sensory experience, become indistinguishably similar to each other as the system adjusts its truth values through logical interconnections. Certainly, Quine identifies some pragmatic trends towards the human tendency to adjust statements with salient empirical references as opposed to theoretical statements previously viewed as analytic or situated centrally within the network of beliefs [2]. But this does not preclude the latter from being revisable but merely grants them the privilege of being less routinely updated. Thus, in accordance with the earlier example about the transitioning definition of “bachelor,” there is no qualitative difference between analytic and synthetic statements, only matters of degree.

Quine pushed the relativism further by elucidating his holism with reference to conceptual schemes and the insertion of objects as posits. Thus, a Windows computer is a posit in the same way as the concept of God. The difference is once again a matter of degree. In comparison to the computer, God has a more difficult time making its way into the web of beliefs of the modern person only because they cannot physically perceive God, and the laws of sensory experiences have been more fleshed out than the laws of God proposed by theologians. This might even explain from a philosophical perspective why medieval peasants had no difficulty believing in God, as they lived in a period of time where the myth of science had not attained the same level of efficacious myth-making that it does now.

Thus, experiences underdetermine posits and consequently the web of beliefs by permitting the possibility of rival conclusions to be held insofar as they do not conflict with each other. And the word “conflict” here is understood flexibly, as the extent to which one belief may conflict with another is yet another underdetermined part of the totality of beliefs, viz., the statements about logical connections themselves. Truth exists relative to this system and does not extend beyond it.

Instead, the Quinean conception of truth is under as much revision as the network of beliefs [3]. Thus, Quine is no doubt an alethic relativist. This relativism about truth is preserved with respect to Quinean ontology [4]. The choice between fictionalism and realism in mathematics, logic, and many other areas of one’s preferred conceptual schemes boils down to the same adjustments as if one were to choose between believing or renouncing God. Their answers serve the purpose of expediency in the form of a smooth and clear frame of mind.

### 3. Epistemological Holism as Relativism

Quine stated in one of his papers that his view of science contains both relativistic and absolutistic elements [5]. But his insistence that truth is contained within theories means that the intuition of absolute truths must be contained within some form of epistemic network. In other words, even the most basic truths ought to be held accountable to a particular system within which the determination of truth is absolute. This accords with the aforementioned discussion about Quine being a relativist towards truth. But Quinean relativism could be understood as the product of this intra-theoretical

application of the term “truth” and the underdetermination of epistemic networks that is key to Quine’s epistemological holism.

Epistemological underdetermination suggests that there could be more than one theory constructed on the same empirical content, i.e., sensory datum [6]. This thesis resonates with Quine’s [7] theory on radical translation, where the tentative definitions of native vocabulary are underdetermined by the evidence of stimulations. To the same extent that the stimulus of the perception of a rabbit constitutes too complex of an empirical content to be individuated and related analytically to a term, the same applies to epistemic networks and their empirical bases.

Certainly, as discussed in the prior section, immediate experiences (excepting the possibility of hallucination and whatnot) can provide a sense of boundary to the epistemic networks. But it is still plausible that in an alternate world identical to the Earth, one would draw different conclusions about the same observations that would go on to form systems of beliefs that have nothing in common with the ones people have now, in spite of having undergone the same empirical boundary conditions in the form of identical experiences.

A non-Quinean might be able to divorce themselves from relativism by asserting some form of rational order by which epistemic orders become organized in accordance with immediate experiences. In other words, a physicalist might consider the epistemic networks to be the concatenation of causal links originating in the empirical content. Consequently, no two theories can share the same empirical content because a person who experienced things in a particular order will necessarily develop a system of beliefs that can be ontologically traced back to such order.

For instance, an ancient Chinese person would possess a different set of interconnected beliefs than an ancient European, since the former experienced different empirical content than the latter. However, the non-Quinean would agree that, had the European been placed in the shoes of the ancient Chinese, they would develop the exact same totality of beliefs, and there are no alternatives otherwise.

On the other hand, a Quinean is not at the same liberty regarding underdetermination. Epistemological holism implies that entirely different epistemic networks can be empirically equal, insofar as they share the same empirical content. Certainly, the revisions to these networks are guided by principles such as conservatism and simplicity, but these principles do not fix one type of empirical content to a designated revision to the totality of beliefs [2][4]. In fact, stipulating any fixed order between empirical content and revision of epistemic networks would risk collapsing back into conventionalism. Therefore, Quineans are required to accept that multiple, entirely different theories based on the same empirical content can be equal, insofar as the choice of one does not prove better than the other on rational grounds. Moreover, in tandem with the aforementioned truth being contained within the theory, Quineans must also accept that truth exists and exists only relative to the respective conceptual scheme (or whatever epistemic network is in use).

By itself, the acceptance of truth as being contained within a theory does not imply relativism, since one could reasonably suggest a theory that others ought to accept as the only rationally coherent theory. At most, accepting truth as theory-dependent negates metaphysical notions of truth or agnosticism about absolute truths. In Quine’s epistemology and ontology, however, the combined forces of treating truth as theory-dependent and the underdetermination present within epistemological holism meant that truth is entirely relative [3][6]. Reiterating in an extremely simplified manner, epistemological underdetermination suggests that there are many conceptual schemes that hold just as good as one another while being entirely different from one another. Truth as theory-dependent suggests that each of these conceptual schemes would hold an absolute set of truths, which would imply a relativistic account of truth.

#### 4. Points of Contentions

There are several points of contention with Quinean relativism as observed in the case thus explicated. Firstly, the conception of truth seems to entirely drop out of the discussion of epistemic issues. The disintegration of the border between analytic-synthetic distinction had removed the last vestige of truth, i.e., logical truths, from epistemology. Admittedly, even logical positivists like Carnap did not hold there to be some universal logical truth that transcends beyond the respective choice of logical frameworks. But it is nevertheless a widely held intuition that basic logic principles like “P is P” are true in a way that is far more convincing than any other statement in the network of beliefs.

Certainly, Quine could claim that such statements are located so far from the periphery of holistic knowledge that their central position is virtually immovable and relativism is only nominal for them. However, this might open Quine to the same type of “incredulous stare” objection that his student David Lewis received for his concretist theory, since it is not very conceivable (unlike the aforementioned example of the “bachelor,” which has far more to do with the English language) that a logical statement of such self-evidence could be perceived any other way. And even if Carnap’s conventional account of logical truth can be disputed, either by arguing that truth-preservation is presupposed ahead of stipulation or that such conventions are incoherent, this does not dispel the intuitive demand for another theory of logical truth [8].

Consider Quine’s argument against Carnap’s conventions where modus ponens is required to infer the logical device of modus ponens from conventions; the result is, as Quine clearly stated in the work *Truth by Convention*, that “logic is needed for inferring logic from conventions” [8][9]. If logic is needed for inferring from conventions, it is equally plausible that logic is needed for inferring from epistemic networks. Epistemic networks are understood here as the fabric of the totality of so-called knowledge.

Yet the dissolution of the analytic-synthetic distinction precisely opposes the necessity of any one logic being required for the functioning of the networks. One rejoinder might be to suggest that while logic is needed, as in the case of Carnap’s conventionalism, different systems of logic can be integrated and revised into the epistemic networks. Still, one might believe that epistemic networks are themselves impossible without some extremely primitive logical intuitions. Recall the earlier example of “P is P.” Could any epistemic function be performed without some degree of presupposing its truth? This presupposition weakens the Quinean relativism discussed thus far.

Another consequence of relativizing knowledge vis-à-vis an epistemic network is the unification between metaphysics and scientific, even mathematical, and logical statements, and the consequent breakdown of the theoretical-practical distinction. By blurring the analytic-synthetic distinction, metaphysical statements are now situated in the same relation with scientific statements as analytic and synthetic statements were discussed in section 1.

Namely, there is no qualitative difference between a metaphysical statement and an empirical one, only matters of degree measured by their respective locations in the epistemic network [1][10]. Thus the theoretical validity of a scientific statement for a scientist is no more than a convincing myth (and conversely, no less rational) as the theological validity of a sermon is for religious devotees. Thus, theory is reduced to the practical tendency to revise minimally and prefer the simplest revisions. In the *Two Dogmas*, Quine offers some recompense by explicating this version of epistemological holism with close references to the centrality of science and logic.

However, the fact that in Quinean relativism, metaphysics can be contemplated rationally may take a toll on the cogency of the theory. Unless metaphysical speculations, or the instinct to contemplate them, can be reduced to some form of sensory prompting, pulling down the imagined boundary between metaphysics and science seems to have opened a new can of worms. Quine proposes conservatism and simplicity as criteria for the pragmatic rationality by which one would



revise their system of beliefs. But temporarily ruling out the stipulatory senses of the criteria, a pragmatic approach towards metaphysics seems counterintuitive.

At most, one could perhaps argue along the lines of human tendency that metaphysical beliefs must be accorded with recalcitrant experiences to ensure some type of cognitive ease; e.g., one would minimally revise their ethical beliefs in the face of external input. This then incurs the question of how recalcitrant experiences of metaphysical beliefs come to form in the first place. Moreover, this could imply that pragmatism becomes entirely an undecided cognitive issue, since it might be too ambiguous to identify rationally what makes one metaphysical statement more conservative or simpler than another.

As the discussion suggests, none of these foregoing points of contention constitute a decisive attack towards the Quinean position, but the issues raised here leave some questions unanswered. By examining the role of skepticism and, more specifically, Quine's theory of indeterminacy of translation in the next section, the paper hopes to see how the inference from underdetermination to indeterminacy of translations could assist in making clearer Quine's position and prevent any slip to a more overly skeptical ontology than Quine would have liked.

## 5. Skepticism and Quinean Relativism

One of the more salient concerns for relativism as it stands in Quine's system of philosophy, most importantly vis-à-vis epistemological holism as previous sections have established, is the skeptical tendencies that the account entails. Relativism towards truth as dependent upon perspectives and where one stands leads naturally to disbelief towards the overall existence of truth. The latter is, as the discussion in the previous section had suggested, an intuitively unacceptable statement.

Moreover, skepticism towards truth is unlike skepticism towards an object or skepticism towards a scientific theory, since the concept of truth is somewhat entailed in any philosophical discussion. This is similar to the issue of "P is P" raised prior, where the statement is unavoidable insofar as any discussion (whatever the conceptual scheme) is to be held. If truth does not exist, or exists in such a way that is inherently meaningless, then what is the point of epistemological holism relative to other theories of epistemology? Therefore, an overly skeptical account towards truth is undesirable, as it would entrap one in a self-refuting cycle tantamount to a skepticism towards language.

Therefore, one would like to at least have some grounds of truth to work with, since the converse would be to disavow truth and render everything in philosophy and beyond nonsensical. Equally, Quine is in agreement with this view, as he too saw the dangers of skepticism eventually nullifying any rational discourse. But his approach to preventing the relativistic strains within his works from devolving into skepticism towards truth is to deny relativism altogether.

For instance, in the *Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World*, Quine suggested that relativism towards truth is question-begging in the following arguments. If an alethic relativist suggests truth is relative, they are suggesting that it is relative to something (e.g., a conceptual scheme of relativity) [11]. Yet, the alethic relativist has already bought such a conceptual scheme, in fact, prior to making the statement about truth. Thus, their statement is an absolute truth within that conceptual scheme, since if they treat the statement as a relative truth, then the statement loses its very significance contra other conceptual schemes.

The difficulty with Quine's argument here is that it can be applied to Quine's own holistic framework as well. Consider another argument in a similar format but replace relativism with epistemological holism. The epistemological holist has already bought a conceptual scheme prior to asserting any statement about the facts of epistemology. If their statement about epistemology is an absolute truth within the conceptual scheme of Quinean philosophy, this is merely trivial. And if they treat epistemological holism as relatively true within a certain epistemic network, then there is no point in discussing epistemological holism any more than asserting some absurd belief is randomly

distributed by a slot machine, given that the latter is relatively true vis-à-vis some epistemic network as well.

Certainly, the epistemological holist might see this as a victory, since this presupposes that epistemology is already holistic with different conceptual schemes. But this victory is no more sound than if the relativist in Quine's case had claimed that Quine's argument about the self-defeating nature of relativism presupposed a relativistic outlook and thereby confirmed what the relativists say about truth.

Even if one does not agree with the foregoing emulation of Quine's argument against relativism, another approach is to assert the argument in section 2 that the underdetermination of epistemic networks and theory-relative truth within Quine's philosophy commits Quineans to relativism. It follows that if Quine's argument is meant to work against all relativists (which it seems to do), then there is no reason to excuse epistemological holists who are included in that camp. Certainly, one could not suggest that relativism is self-defeating, except for the relativistic strains in their philosophy. Therefore, whichever way one is to concede the relativism inherent in epistemological holism, it would seem that Quineans would have to choose between being doomed to some skeptical account of epistemological holism that they cannot object to or retract their objections to relativists that Quine seemed committed to.

The main caveat of relativism is that the view proposes an ironical and self-defeating statement that everything is relative, except this statement, which is not relative. Applied to truth, alethic relativists say that all truths are relative, with the exception of this statement, which is absolutely true. Self-referencing, akin to Russell's liar's paradox, is what is at stake here. In a way, epistemological holism feels relativistic or contains strains of relativism, as Quine [5] admitted, because it is a theory that references itself via the introduction of epistemic networks.

To meet this self-referencing objection towards epistemological holism, it is vital that one recalls the foregoing distinction between the two pillars that compel Quineans to commit to relativism in their systems of beliefs. Recall the two concepts discussed previously, truth as theory-relative and epistemological underdetermination; the former does not avail itself to the same self-referencing critique that a relativist theory of truth would, despite similarities between these two theories. The truth of the statement "truth exists relative to a theory" can be held as true only relative to a theory and, in this case, whichever conceptual scheme that the subject possesses. Thus, the statement is not a universal quantifier over all theories, unlike the relativist account of truth. Instead, no exception has been made, and "truth is relative to a theory" is true relative to a theory (i.e., epistemological holism), just like any other non-ontological truths in that theory. This is certainly different from the relativist position that the statement "truth is relative" is not relative, unlike any other truths. On the other hand, the underdetermination of epistemic networks by empirical content does not have any significant self-referencing problems. Consequently, it should be treated as simply a metaphysical statement about there being more than one empirically equivalent theory that draws from the same empirical content.

Even if this setup does not completely remove the challenge towards the self-referencing aspects of epistemological holism, it weakens the blow of the objection immensely. At most, a critique could suggest that subjects wrapped up in other conceptual schemes may not agree with the statement that "truth is relative to a theory." But it is not the concern of the epistemological holist to ensure that everyone sees epistemology the way they do. In fact, the epistemological holist believes in precisely the opposite, that different subjects see epistemology differently owing to their differences in epistemic networks. So Quine's earlier attack against relativism should not be applied to his own account not due to exceptions but because epistemological holism entertains a type of relativism different from the one that Quine was targeting. The strains of relativism that Quine's theory of epistemological holism involves have much to do with its concept that truth hinges upon the theory

whence the truth came about. This concept, as explicated thus far, has relativistic colors but is not susceptible to the usual objections towards relativism.

Therefore, clarification is needed for Quineans to properly square the relativistic element in their epistemological and ontological beliefs with the fear of slipping into a nullifying account of skepticism or utilize the same self-defeating reasoning that Quine had identified in other relativistic theories about truth. The paper thus proposes the following clarifications. Firstly, relativism about truth, in its more primitive and conventional formats, is self-defeating because it claims the non-existence of absolute truth, and the claim of which is an absolute truth in itself. In fact, for these accounts, it is impossible for the relativist to claim the non-existence of absolute truth without simultaneously creating one. But Quinean relativism, as the paper has discussed thus far, is not open to this objection because only a part of its theory, namely that the view of truth is theory-dependent, is liable to self-referencing. Moreover, the Quinean view of truth as contained within the theory is not self-defeating, because one could claim that truth is contained within their very theory without having to create any truth that transcends beyond their conceptual scheme. Therefore, Quine's theory of epistemological holism contains relativistic colors, insofar as the truths in conceptual schemes are only true relative to these schemes. But these relativistic colors do not make the theory liable to the same objections advanced against conventional relativism, as the self-referencing is conducted in a non-circular manner. Moreover, this shows how the skeptical criticisms of epistemological holism can be refuted by arguing that Quinean relativism does not slip into the same self-defeating and incoherent reasoning as do other relativisms.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this breakdown of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements bore immense ontological and epistemological implications for the system of Quinean philosophy. Upon examining the arguments from *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* and beyond, the paper finds that the theoretical challenges made by Quine towards the concept of analyticity and, consequently, the analytic-synthetic distinction could be highly plausible. However, the paper argues that this move commits Quine to an ontologically relativistic attitude towards truth by stipulating truth as theory-dependent. This relativism, as the paper argued in section 2, is finalized in the underdetermination entailed by Quine's epistemological holism, which commits Quineans to multiple empirically equivalent theories with their respective truths.

This commitment is improbable to forsake without breaching many of the key principles within epistemological holism that a Quinean would wish to hold. Therefore, one is left with a relativistic attitude towards truth that pertains to certain drawbacks. In section 3, the paper outlines two of them and argues that they do not constitute any serious threat to the cogency of Quine's theory. However, if epistemological holism is to be sustained and sustained in a way that fits the original intentions of Quine, the paper argues that his positions must be clarified. In section 4, the paper discusses the concerns of an overly skeptical account of truth and ontology that epistemological holism seems to implicate.

To avoid this, as it conflicts with Quine's original intentions when penning the *Two Dogmas*, the paper suggests that Quinean relativism be clarified versus conventional understandings of relativism. More specifically, this involves the recognition that a relativist in the Quinean sense can hold an absolutist belief in some conceptual scheme over another. In fact, if it be granted that the theory of epistemological holism holds, then it is probably true that anyone, including relativists, already holds absolute beliefs in their respective epistemic networks anyway. This does not exclude the possibility, and here is where Quine's contributions should be read as containing relativistic colors, that there are other equally successful epistemic networks treating the same empirical network.



In a way, this paper returns to a two-layered (and one that somewhat mirrors the analytic-synthetic distinction) approach to ontology in that the relativism outside of conceptual schemes must not interfere with the absolutism with which one holds one conceptual scheme above others. This is a plausible form of relativism that accords with Quine's epistemological holism while not conflicting with his criticisms of relativism, especially skeptical ones, as incoherent and self-stultifying.

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